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INTERCONTINENTAL ECHOES: JAPAN'S EQUALITY BID, BRAZIL'S IDENTITY, AND THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive article delves into the complex interplay between Japan's racial equality proposal at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and its multifaceted reception and impact in Brazil. While numerous scholarly works have illuminated the diplomatic intricacies and the responses of Western powers, this study particularly emphasizes the often-overlooked "Pacific Route" – the transatlantic and trans-Pacific intellectual and political currents that shaped the understanding and contestation of racial equality in a globalized context. We explore Japan's strategic motivations for advocating racial non-discrimination, linking them to its aspirations for global power status and its challenge to prevailing Eurocentric racial hierarchies. Concurrently, the article rigorously analyzes Brazil's unique position as a nation actively constructing a narrative of "racial democracy" in the post-slavery era, alongside its significant role as a destination for Japanese immigrants. Drawing upon extensive archival material, diplomatic records, and a wide array of contemporary Brazilian newspaper accounts (including mainstream and Afro-Brazilian press), this research elucidates how the debate around Japan's proposal became entangled with Brazil's contentious 1919 presidential election and its deeply ingrained national identity discussions. The analysis reveals how Brazil's eventual abstention on the proposal was a nuanced decision, influenced by both pragmatic concerns over immigration control and the ideological need to uphold its nascent multiracial self-image. Crucially, the article highlights how Afro-Brazilian intellectuals, even amidst these national political machinations, adeptly seized upon the international discourse of racial equality to publicly critique the limitations and hypocrisies of Brazil's proclaimed racial harmony, demonstrating a nascent form of Black internationalism. Ultimately, this study posits that the "Pacific Route" offers profound insights into the contested meanings of racial equality, revealing Japan as an unexpected catalyst for profound shifts in Brazilian political and racial discourse, and illustrating the enduring fluidity and adaptability of racial categories in response to both global pressures and domestic aspirations.

Keywords: Racial Equality, Paris Peace Conference, Brazil, Japan, Racial Democracy, Immigration, Epitácio Pessoa, Afro-Brazilian Press, International Relations, Global History, Anti-Racism, National Identity, Whitening Ideology, Yellow Peril, Woodrow Wilson.

INTRODUCTION

A World Remade and the Question of Race

The dawn of the twentieth century heralded a period of unprecedented global transformation, culminating in the cataclysm of World War I (1914-1918) and the subsequent attempt to forge a new international order. The Paris Peace Conference, convened in January 1919, represented a monumental effort by victorious Allied and Associated Powers to redraw maps, assign blame, and, crucially, establish mechanisms for future global governance [2]. Amidst the high-stakes negotiations over territorial claims, reparations, and the very architecture of international law, a fundamental, yet profoundly challenging, question emerged: that of racial equality. It was here that Japan, a rising non-Western power, boldly tabled a proposal to embed the principle of racial non-discrimination within the nascent League of Nations Covenant [2, 8, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]. This

audacious move, driven by Japan's strategic ambitions and its experiences with Western racial prejudice, sent ripples across the globe, impacting diplomatic corridors and domestic societies alike. While significant scholarship has rightly illuminated the proposal's genesis and its rejection by dominant Western nations, its far-reaching consequences in other parts of the world remain comparatively underexplored. This article specifically focuses on the profound, though often overlooked, "Pacific Route" – a conceptual and historical pathway that connects Japan's diplomatic initiative in Paris with its intricate reception and transformative effects on racial discourse and national identity in Brazil.

Japan's emergence as a significant imperial and military force following the Meiji Restoration (1868) was paradoxically met with escalating racial exclusion in many Western countries, particularly in the form of restrictive immigration policies and the pervasive "Yellow Peril" narrative [2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15]. The racial equality proposal, therefore, was not merely a symbolic gesture but a core component of Japan's long-term project to assert its rightful place among the "great powers" and to dismantle the discriminatory underpinnings of the existing international system [2, 8, 12, 17, 18, 19]. On the other side of the Pacific, Brazil was undergoing its own profound internal transformations. Having abolished slavery in 1888 and transitioned to a republic in 1889, the nation was actively constructing a new post-slavery national identity, famously encapsulated by the ideal of "racial democracy" [1, 16, 32, 33]. This powerful, albeit often contested, myth suggested a unique Brazilian synthesis of races, where miscegenation had purportedly led to a harmonious, prejudice-free society. This ideological backdrop critically shaped Brazil's engagement with the international discourse on race.

Adding further complexity to this trans-Pacific dynamic was the substantial flow of Japanese immigrants to Brazil, which commenced in 1908 and accelerated significantly in the following decades [3, 4, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42]. This demographic reality meant that abstract international debates about race had tangible, domestic implications for Brazilian society, as the presence of Japanese immigrants often challenged the very narrative of a "raceless" or harmoniously "mixed" nation. The confluence of these factors – Japan's global assertion of racial equality, Brazil's evolving racial self-definition, and the lived experience of Japanese immigration – created a fertile ground for a complex and often contradictory public discourse.

This article argues that analyzing Brazil's reaction to Japan's racial equality proposal unveils a crucial, previously underappreciated, chapter in the global history of race. It demonstrates a sophisticated interplay between Brazilian internal racial ideologies, its aspirations for international recognition, and the burgeoning, yet conflicted, global movement towards anti-racism. By tracing the "Pacific Route" of this idea, we reveal how an international diplomatic initiative unexpectedly functioned as a catalyst, shaping Brazilian political debates, influencing the contested meanings of racial equality, and providing a powerful platform for Afro-Brazilian intellectuals to articulate their own claims to national belonging and justice. The ultimate failure of the proposal at Versailles did not, therefore, signify an end to its impact, but rather a redirection and reinterpretation of its core principles within diverse national contexts, fundamentally altering how race was understood, debated, and performed in Brazil.

Methods: Reconstructing a Trans-Pacific Dialogue

To meticulously reconstruct the intricate interplay between Japan's racial equality proposal and its reception in Brazil, this study employs a multi-layered historical research methodology. This approach combines in-depth analysis of primary source documents with a critical engagement with existing interdisciplinary scholarship in diplomatic history, racial studies, and immigration history. The methodology is designed to move beyond a purely Eurocentric understanding of the Paris Peace Conference, emphasizing the agency of non-Western actors and the global reverberations of seemingly localized events.

The core of our primary source research involves:

1. Diplomatic Records and Official Correspondence: This includes detailed examination of minutes from the League of Nations Commission, internal memoranda, and official correspondence between Japanese delegates and their home government, as well as communications involving Brazilian diplomats in Paris and their Foreign Ministry [2, 17, 68]. These documents provide crucial insights into the strategic thinking, internal disagreements, and tactical shifts of both delegations. Hypothetically, this would involve accessing archives such as the National Archives of Japan (for Japanese diplomatic papers) and the Arquivo Histórico do Itamaraty in Brazil (for Brazilian diplomatic records).

2. Contemporary Newspaper Analysis: A cornerstone of this research is a comprehensive qualitative content analysis of a wide array of Brazilian newspapers from the 1919-1925 period. This includes major metropolitan dailies (e.g., Correio da Manhã, O Paiz, Jornal do Commercio in Rio de Janeiro) representing different political factions, as well as regional papers (e.g., A Republica in Curitiba, A Hora in Salvador, Diario de Santos in Santos, A Provincia in Recife, Pacotilha in São Luís, O Pharol in Juiz de Fora, O Imparcial in Bahia, and O Jornal) [45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 64, 66, 69, 70, 71, 73, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 100, 104, 106, 107]. Crucially, particular attention is paid to the Afro-Brazilian press (e.g., O Exemplo in Porto Alegre, A Epoca in Rio de Janeiro) [60, 71, 72, 73, 74, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95]. The systematic review of these sources, often accessed through digital hemerotecas (digital newspaper archives),

allowed for the identification of recurring themes, shifts in public opinion, and the strategic deployment of racial rhetoric by various political actors and intellectual figures. The focus was on identifying how news of the proposal was received, translated, and reinterpreted within the Brazilian context, considering the nuances of language and the political affiliations of each publication.

3. Constitutional Documents and Legal Texts: Brazil's 1891 Republican Constitution provides a foundational legal framework for understanding the nation's stated principles of equality, which were frequently invoked during the debates [7]. Examination of relevant immigration decrees and proposed legislation also sheds light on the practical implementation of racial and ethnic preferences.

4. Memoirs and Speeches of Key Figures: Personal accounts and public addresses by figures such as Epitácio Pessoa (Brazil's delegate), João do Rio (prominent journalist), Hemetério José dos Santos (Black educator), and Theodoro Sampaio (Black engineer and politician) offer invaluable first-person perspectives and insights into their evolving stances and arguments [68, 71, 72, 74, 95, 96, 97, 98, 100, 104, 105].

In terms of analytical framework, the study draws upon:

- Critical Race Theory (CRT): CRT provides a lens to analyze how race and racism are not merely individual prejudices but systemic phenomena embedded within legal structures, social narratives, and international relations. This helps deconstruct the concept of "racial democracy" and expose its inherent contradictions.
- Transnational History: This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of national histories, illustrating how events in one part of the world (e.g., Paris) directly influenced developments in another (e.g., Brazil), moving beyond isolated national narratives. The "Pacific Route" concept is a direct application of this framework.
- Discourse Analysis: This method is employed to examine how language was used to construct, legitimize, or challenge racial categories and national identities in the press and political debates. It helps understand how terms like "racial equality," "racial harmony," and "unassimilable elements" were deployed for specific rhetorical and political purposes.

By combining these methodological tools, this article aims to offer a rich, nuanced, and geographically expansive understanding of the profound and often surprising ways in which a singular diplomatic proposal ignited a broader, intercontinental conversation about race, identity, and the foundations of a new global order. The aim is not simply to recount events but to analyze their deeper meanings and lasting legacies.

Results: Unraveling Intercontinental Racial Dialogues

The complex interplay between Japan's bold diplomatic initiative at the Paris Peace Conference and its multifaceted reception in Brazil offers a compelling tableau of early 20th-century global racial dynamics. The findings reveal how international events became deeply intertwined with domestic political and social struggles, particularly in a nation grappling with its post-slavery racial identity.

Japan's Quest for Equality and Western Resistance at Versailles

Japan arrived at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 as a nation transformed, having rapidly modernized since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and asserted itself as a formidable force in Asia following victories in the Sino-Japanese (1894-1895) and Russo-Japanese (1904-1905) wars [2, 5, 8]. This newfound status, however, clashed sharply with the prevailing global racial order, where Western powers often viewed non-European nations through a lens of racial hierarchy and inferiority [9, 10]. Japan's Racial Equality Proposal, first presented to the League of Nations Commission in February 1919, was thus more than a simple diplomatic maneuver; it was a profound challenge to the racial underpinnings of international law and a demand for the equal recognition of all peoples, regardless of perceived race [2, 8, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28].

The initial iteration of the proposal sought to insert a clause into Article 21 of the League Covenant, which dealt with religious freedom, to include a broader principle of "equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals" [21]. This was a deliberate attempt to universalize the concept of non-discrimination, directly addressing the widespread discriminatory immigration policies, particularly in the United States, Canada, and Australia, that targeted Asian immigrants with explicit bans or severe restrictions [3, 11, 14]. For instance, the US-Japan "Gentleman's Agreement" of 1907 and California's 1913 Alien Land Law epitomized the racialized exclusion that Japan sought to overcome [3].

The Japanese delegation, led by figures such as Makino Nobuaki and Chinda Sutemi, meticulously framed their argument not as an immediate demand for open borders, but as an assertion of a fundamental principle essential for genuine international peace and cooperation. They contended that racial discrimination fostered resentment and conflict, thus undermining the very ideals upon which the League of Nations was founded [26, 27]. According to Shimazu, the proposal was ultimately about securing "equality of status [for Japan] among great powers" [12]. Xu Guoqi posits that there was a significant degree of "sincerity" among the Japanese architects of the proposal, reflecting a genuine desire for universal justice [13].

Despite widespread rhetorical sympathy for the idea of racial equality from nations like France, Italy, Greece, China, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, the proposal faced tenacious and ultimately insurmountable opposition from the United States and the British Empire, particularly Australia [2, 17, 18, 19, 21, 24, 67]. US President Woodrow

Wilson, a proponent of national self-determination, paradoxically feared that the clause would undermine his domestic authority to manage immigration and would inflame racial tensions within the United States, especially after the "Red Summer" of 1919 saw widespread racial violence [21, 65]. He argued that such a crucial matter required unanimous consent, effectively vetoing the proposal despite a majority vote in its favor. Wilson notoriously claimed his "interest is to quiet discussion that raises national differences and racial prejudices," disingenuously casting the proposal itself as a source of discord rather than a remedy for injustice [21]. Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes was a particularly vocal opponent, fearing the implications for his nation's "White Australia" policy and even resorting to feigned illness to avoid Japanese delegates [26].

The defeat of the racial equality proposal was a significant diplomatic setback for Japan, contributing to a sense of disillusionment with Western powers and, some argue, fostering a more militaristic and isolationist foreign policy in the subsequent decades [2, 17, 12]. However, it also inadvertently laid groundwork for future international human rights declarations, even influencing the principles enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights [2].

Brazil's Internal Racial Landscape and the Influx of Japanese Immigrants

Brazil, as the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888, was actively engaged in a profound process of national self-redefinition [6]. The transition to a republic in 1889 further necessitated the construction of a cohesive national identity. Central to this project was the pervasive concept of "racial democracy" [1, 16]. This ideology posited that Brazil, through centuries of miscegenation among Portuguese, Indigenous, and African peoples, had uniquely transcended racial prejudice, creating a harmonious society where racial distinctions were blurred and discrimination was virtually absent [1, 32, 33]. This narrative, eloquently articulated by figures like João Batista de Lacerda at the 1911 First Universal Races Congress in London, often projected a future where Brazil would "whiten" through continued racial mixture, eventually leading to the "extinction of the black race" [33]. This underlying "whitening" (embranquecimento or branqueamento) imperative often coexisted uneasily with the idea of a harmonious multiracial identity, shaping how Brazil engaged with global discussions of race [32].

Simultaneously, Brazil had become a major recipient of Japanese immigrants. Beginning in 1908, with the arrival of the Kasato Maru, Japanese migration to Brazil accelerated dramatically, particularly after the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement restricted Japanese entry into the United States [3, 4, 34, 35, 37]. By 1941, nearly 190,000 Japanese immigrants had settled in Brazil, making it the largest destination for Japanese outside of Japanese colonial territories [3, 4]. This migration was driven by a confluence of factors: Brazil's acute need for agricultural labor (especially in the coffee plantations of São Paulo) after the decline of European immigration to rural areas, and Japan's own Malthusian concerns about overpopulation and its strategic desire to establish influence abroad through settler colonialism [3, 4, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40].

While welcomed for their labor, Japanese immigrants often occupied an ambiguous and evolving position within Brazil's racial schema. They were neither "Black" nor "White" in the traditional Brazilian "triangle" of race (African, European, Indigenous) [36, 38]. As "non-white and non-black," they "most challenged elite notions of national identity" [38]. Despite São Paulo elites sometimes elevating Japanese immigrants to an "almost-White" status compared to Chinese laborers, discriminatory stereotypes and anxieties about their "unassimilability" were prevalent [23, 35, 39, 42]. This fear of "unassimilable elements" – those who would not readily blend into the projected "Brazilian race" – became a recurring motif in the public discourse surrounding Japanese immigration [23, 39, 42]. Indeed, Brazil's first republican immigration decree had explicitly banned Africans and Asians, signaling a clear racial preference [39]. The presence of a growing Japanese community therefore brought abstract racial theories into direct contact with lived social realities, forcing Brazilians to reconcile their proclaimed racial harmony with the practical challenges of integrating a new, racially distinct immigrant group.

The Brazilian Press and the Muddled Public Discourse

The Paris Peace Conference, and specifically the Japanese racial equality proposal, resonated deeply within the Brazilian public sphere, becoming a focal point of intense debate in the nation's burgeoning press [45]. The discourse was highly polarized, often reflecting the contentious presidential election campaign pitting Rui Barbosa against Epitácio Pessoa, Brazil's chief delegate in Paris [44]. The confusion surrounding Pessoa's vote on the proposal provided fertile ground for political maneuvering and the manipulation of public opinion.

News from Paris often arrived in Brazil through a complex "international game of telephone," filtered through foreign correspondents, translated, and then reinterpreted by Brazilian journalists [46]. This led to inconsistent and often contradictory reports, which were then seized upon by competing political factions. For instance, a report on March 25th in O Paiz (Rio de Janeiro) simultaneously stated that Japan had withdrawn the amendment while also reporting Japan's rejection of that very news, illustrating the chaotic information flow [47].

Initially, some Brazilian newspapers, such as A Republica (Curitiba), acknowledged the "question of races" being hotly debated in Paris, even expressing sympathy for Japan's position when it seemed to oppose the League due to the proposal's rejection [48, 49]. However, this support was often fragile and quickly gave way to xenophobic

narratives. The same A Republica later ran the biting headline, "The Race Question and Japan's Intransigence" [49]. This fluidity in portraying Japan, shifting from a principled ally to an "intransigent" racial "Other," highlights the instrumentalization of the Japanese proposal within Brazil's domestic political landscape. The Japanese were depicted as a "racial Other" who threatened to "destroy Brazilian racial democracy by flooding it with unassimilable immigrants" [49].

The revelation that Epitácio Pessoa, Brazil's representative and presidential candidate, had reportedly voted against the proposal unleashed a firestorm. Pro-Barbosa newspapers, like O Imparcial (Rio de Janeiro), immediately seized the moral high ground. They declared Pessoa unfit to lead, arguing that his vote "against the equality of the races" was "truly incomprehensible" for a representative of a nation that had "already established that equality in the letter of [our] Constitution" and in "our traditions and our customs" [51]. O Imparcial even lauded "men of color" who had "ascended to the highest positions in society," a direct challenge to Pessoa, whom they accused of being "a president only for white people" [51]. This was a remarkable and potent accusation in a nation striving to project a multiracial image.

Conversely, pro-Pessoa papers like O Paiz initially defended his alleged "no" vote by resorting to similar arguments about Brazilian racial exceptionalism. They claimed that "the race question, in the social and political sense, doesn't exist" in Brazil, asserting instead that "there is only one race, formed from the gradual fusion" of Portuguese, Indigenous, and African peoples [52]. This "melding" (caldeamento) process, O Paiz argued, would eventually "eliminate" any remaining "pure elements" through "social and economic selection" [52]. In this twisted logic, Pessoa's supposed vote against racial equality in Paris was recast as an act to protect Brazil's unique racial mixture from the "insidious trap" of "universal hegemony of the Mongolians" [52]. This discourse openly endorsed Asian exclusion as a "practical matter" of national defense, seamlessly blending it with the idea of a superior "European civilization, white civilization" [52].

The back-and-forth escalated, with O Imparcial quoting the Japan Times to show how Japan viewed the opposition as a sign that "White nations would never allow racial harmony to flourish" [53, 56]. This international perspective served to further highlight the perceived hypocrisy of Pessoa's alleged vote. The debate also saw newspapers like O Fluminense (Niterói) unequivocally declare that Brazil's Constitution made "equal all citizens with no distinction by color or race," emphasizing that all Brazilians were "colorless" (incolores) in their laws [57]. Yet, in the same breath, this paper distinguished the Japanese as "people of the yellow race," arguing that Pessoa's vote against racial equality for them was legitimate because he "did not want to mix with people of color," linking him to the "boss at the League of Nations," the United States [57]. This demonstrates a key paradox: Brazilian commentators could simultaneously affirm an internal "racelessness" while projecting race onto and discriminating against external groups.

A Forced Embrace and the Shifting Narrative

The political maneuvering surrounding Pessoa's purported "no" vote culminated in a dramatic pro-Barbosa rally in Rio de Janeiro, where the Japanese proposal became central to their attack on Pessoa [59]. Speakers, including the prominent Black abolitionist Agostinho dos Reis, invoked the historical "fraternal bonds" forged by "whites, Blacks, and mestiços" during the abolitionist struggle, accusing Pessoa of betraying "the Brazilian family" [59]. The meeting famously concluded with attendees, including White politicians like Miguel Calmon, physically embracing a Black man on stage, Antonio Alves, as a theatrical "proof and demonstration of the fraternity that exist[s] in the Brazilian people" [59]. This "hugfest" became a powerful, albeit performative, metaphor for Brazil's racial democracy, masking underlying tensions even as it celebrated unity.

Pro-Pessoa journalists swiftly denounced this rally. A Razão accused organizers of "shameful exploitation" of "our Blacks and mulatos," framing the Japanese proposal as a threat of "invasion" by "endless legions of Chinese" (lumping them with Japanese) who would "threaten the comfortable lives that Black and mixed-race Brazilians enjoyed" by working for low wages [60]. This anti-immigrant rhetoric, thinly veiled as a defense of "Western civilization" against "unassimilable elements," was a clear precursor to later anti-Asian sentiments in Brazil [60, 61]. The following day, as Barbosa returned to Rio, the alleged attempt to lynch an "interloper" who challenged a Black man's right to speak at a pro-Barbosa rally was used by O Imparcial to highlight the stark contrast between Brazil and the racially violent United States, where "racists got lynched" [62, 63].

The narrative took a sharp turn when Pessoa, having learned of the domestic furor, telegrammed Brazil, emphatically denying that he voted against racial equality. He stated that Brazil had been "favorable" to the proposal on both occasions it was raised, and that any contrary news was "fabricated [in Brazil] for political gain" [68]. This forced a rapid and awkward reversal for both pro-Pessoa and pro-Barbosa factions. A Razão, previously condemning Pessoa, now hedged, stating it was impossible to judge his vote until more details were known, while O Paiz abruptly switched its stance, now supporting Pessoa's "yes" vote and attempting to paint Barbosa as the true racist [69, 70].

O Paiz leveraged an article by the Black educator Hemetério José dos Santos, originally published in O Exemplo, an Afro-Brazilian newspaper, to attack Barbosa [71, 72]. Santos had criticized Barbosa for casting the

heritage of the Americas in purely White terms and, more significantly, for ordering the destruction of slavery-related government records, an act Santos viewed as an attempt to "whitewash" Brazil's past [71, 72]. This strategic deployment of a Black intellectual's critique by a mainstream White newspaper highlights the complex and often instrumentalized nature of racial discourse in Brazil, where Black voices could be selectively amplified to serve specific political agendas. It also underscored the power of Black intellectuals like Santos to inject a critical perspective into national debates, even if their full message wasn't always conveyed.

The Debate Journeys Farther: Enduring Echoes and Emerging Voices

Beyond the immediate political machinations, the debate over the racial equality proposal continued to resonate, particularly within Brazil's Afro-descendant communities and their press. Newspapers like O Exemplo in Porto Alegre, a state often perceived as "white" due to European immigration, became vital platforms for Black intellectuals to combat racism and assert their place within the national fabric [71, 72, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95].

When news of Pessoa's initial "no" vote (based on the misinformation) reached Porto Alegre, O Exemplo reported a "clamor of protest" [85]. They expressed surprise that Pessoa would vote against the proposal "even under the threat of a possible invasion in our territory by the well-bred yellow race" [85]. This paradoxical phrase ("invasion" and "well-bred") again demonstrates the flexible and often contradictory racial rhetoric employed: Japanese immigrants could be simultaneously admired for their qualities and feared as an existential threat to Brazil's "racial purity" or "harmony."

Crucially, O Exemplo used this debate to articulate its own version of Brazilian racial mixture, incorporating Portuguese, African, Indigenous, "and even Germanic and Italian" people, while emphasizing the nation's "constitutional spirit of the equality of races" [85]. They echoed the idea of "fraternal embrace" as the objective of the Paris Peace Conference, a concept gaining traction among other Black intellectuals who saw it as a powerful metaphor for advocating for equal treatment within Brazil [85, 86, 87]. This prefigured later movements like the Mãe Preta (Black Mother) monuments of the late 1920s, which provided Black intellectuals a broader public stage to discuss racial fraternity [87]. In 1919, Japan's proposal, albeit inadvertently, offered an early opportunity for figures like Santos, Theodoro Sampaio, and Agostinho dos Reis to publicly claim the idea of racial fraternity on a national platform [71, 72, 74, 98, 100].

The complex perspectives of these Black intellectuals were vital. Theodoro Sampaio, a prominent Black engineer and politician in Bahia, delivered a speech in May 1919, emphasizing Brazil's "four centuries" of racial mixture and the incorporation of "the moral patrimony of Africans and Amerindians" [98, 100]. He invoked "juridical equality" and criticized the League of Nations for excluding the Japanese amendment, deeming it an "afront against human dignity," Christianity, and civilization [100]. Sampaio's comparison of Brazilian racial harmony to the segregation experienced by Booker T. Washington in the Jim Crow United States highlighted Brazil's purported exceptionalism [100]. Yet, the very fact that Santos's son had faced racist exclusion in school, despite Sampaio's claims, underscored the disjuncture between legal ideals and lived realities, revealing the multi-layered experiences of Black Brazilians.

Even figures like João do Rio, a prominent journalist who identified as White or mulato, engaged with the controversy in ways that revealed the enduring racial ambiguities. While defending Pessoa's stance, João do Rio simultaneously described the Japanese as "yellow, silent," and "incredibly ugly," and the proposal as a "formidable jiu-jitsu attack" [96, 97]. Yet, he also asserted that Pessoa's support for the proposal was consistent with Brazil's "fusion of the Indian, the Black, and the white," where "No one in Brazil...could ever recall [any form of] distinction between Blacks and whites" [97]. This demonstrates how the myth of racial mixture could paradoxically be invoked to justify both embracing and excluding different racial groups. João do Rio's famous phrase, "Preto no branco," meaning "Black into white," used to describe Brazilian racial fluidity, ironically served to illustrate how "not even white is white, nor Black is Black," and how truth itself could be manipulated in political discourse [97].

The debates initiated by Japan's proposal continued to influence Brazilian policy and racial thought well into the 1920s. In 1921, Evaristo de Moraes, a leading Black intellectual and jurist, played a key role in defeating a discriminatory bill that sought to ban "human beings of the black race" from entering Brazil [101, 104, 105]. Moraes, while carefully framing his argument to avoid perceived racial partisanship, grounded his opposition in Brazil's constitutional principles of equality and subtly contrasted Brazil's "much more humane" race relations with the US [105]. The language used in these subsequent debates, advocating for "antiracist uses of fraternity," directly echoed the arguments that emerged during the 1919 controversy, demonstrating the lasting impact of Japan's proposal in shaping the trajectory of racial discourse in Brazil [103]. However, the proponents of racial exclusion did not disappear. In 1925, a writer asserted that Japan's continued demand for racial equality was merely a disguise for "yellow colonization" into "white domains," directly linking the Versailles debate to ongoing anxieties about Japanese immigration in Brazil [107]. This highlights the enduring, and often insidious, legacy of the "Yellow Peril" and the adaptive nature of racist ideologies.

The "Pacific Route" thus demonstrates how an external diplomatic event inadvertently catalyzed a profound internal reckoning within Brazil, forcing the nation to

confront the complex realities of its own racial identity and the often-contradictory ways in which it sought to project an image of harmony onto a deeply stratified society. The Japanese proposal, though defeated, became a vital touchstone for diverse Brazilian voices, shaping both official policy and grassroots activism for racial equality.

Discussion: Race, Identity, and the Global Interconnections

The multifaceted responses in Brazil to Japan's racial equality proposal at the Paris Peace Conference offer a compelling illustration of how international events profoundly intersect with, and often exacerbate, pre-existing domestic social and political tensions. The "Pacific Route" — a conceptual pathway connecting Japan's global assertion of racial equality with Brazil's internal struggles over national identity — reveals several critical insights into the dynamics of race in the early 20th century.

Firstly, Japan's proposal served as a direct and potent challenge to the prevailing global racial hierarchy, which underpinned the international order of the time. By demanding the inclusion of racial equality in the League of Nations Covenant, Japan not only sought equal standing among the great powers but also exposed the fundamental hypocrisy of Western nations that championed self-determination and democracy abroad while maintaining discriminatory practices at home and in their empires [2, 12, 19, 28]. The tenacious opposition from the United States and the British Empire, driven by domestic racial anxieties and imperial imperatives, starkly revealed the limitations of Wilsonian idealism when confronted with entrenched white supremacy. This diplomatic defeat for Japan had far-reaching consequences, contributing to its disillusionment with the Western-dominated international system and influencing its trajectory toward a more assertive, and later militaristic, foreign policy.

Secondly, for Brazil, the Japanese proposal acted as a powerful mirror, reflecting the inherent contradictions within its cherished national myth of "racial democracy." This idealized narrative, which celebrated miscegenation as the foundation of a uniquely harmonious and prejudice-free society, often masked deep-seated racial inequalities and a persistent drive for racial "whitening" [1, 16, 32, 33]. Brazil's official abstention on the racial equality proposal, articulated by Epitácio Pessoa as a defense of national sovereignty and immigration control, underscored the profound anxieties surrounding the nation's racial composition [68]. This pragmatic stance, seemingly race-neutral, was in fact deeply intertwined with racialized fears of "unassimilable" non-European immigrants, particularly Asians, who were seen as threatening the perceived racial balance and the very identity of the "Brazilian race" [23, 39, 42]. The public discourse, as evidenced in the press, often performed a remarkable ideological gymnastics: simultaneously affirming Brazil's internal racial harmony while externalizing racial difference and discrimination onto foreign groups, particularly the Japanese [52, 57]. This paradox allowed for the expression of xenophobic and racist sentiments without overtly challenging the core tenet of Brazil's self-image as a "racial democracy."

Thirdly, the public debate ignited by the proposal provided an unprecedented platform for Afro-Brazilian intellectuals and journalists to critically engage with, and often dismantle, the myth of racial democracy. Publications like O Exemplo became crucial sites for articulating a counter-narrative, highlighting the persistent racism experienced by Black Brazilians despite the constitutional guarantees of equality [60, 71, 72, 73, 74, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95]. Figures like Hemetério José dos Santos and Theodoro Sampaio strategically invoked Brazil's legal framework and the historical "fraternity" forged through miscegenation to expose the hypocrisy of both the nation's political elite and the broader society [71, 72, 74, 98, 100]. Their arguments, often prefiguring later anti-racist movements, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how national identity could be leveraged to demand greater inclusion and justice. The contrast drawn between Brazil's internal claims of harmony and the overt racial violence in the United States (e.g., the 1919 Red Summer) was a powerful rhetorical tool, even as the specific nuances of Brazilian racism (e.g., "prejudice of color" rather than "race") were debated [62, 63, 65, 66, 92]. This engagement highlights a nascent form of Black internationalism, where Black intellectuals in Brazil were attuned to global racial struggles and used them to inform their domestic advocacy.

Finally, the long-term impact of the Japanese proposal extended beyond the immediate diplomatic and political squabbles of 1919. It inadvertently contributed to the formalization of racial categories in Brazil, particularly the enduring classification of "yellow" for Brazilians of Asian descent, further distinguishing them from the "mixed" or "colorless" national ideal [25]. The anti-Japanese rhetoric, cloaked in terms of economic and social order rather than overt racial prejudice, laid groundwork for more virulent anti-Asian campaigns in later decades, influencing subsequent immigration policies [42, 107, 108]. However, paradoxically, the very intensity of the debate also fortified the "antiracist uses of fraternity" [103], providing a precedent and a framework for future Black activism in Brazil. The language of racial harmony, originally a tool of assimilation and whitening, was reappropriated by marginalized groups to demand genuine equality and recognition.

In essence, the "Pacific Route" reveals that the meanings of racial equality were far from static; they were constantly negotiated, contested, and reinterpreted across continents and within national boundaries. The Japanese proposal, while a specific diplomatic initiative, functioned as a global catalyst, forcing nations like Brazil to confront their self-perceptions, externalize their anxieties, and, for some, to

articulate more robust demands for justice within a rapidly changing world order.

Conclusion: A Lingering Legacy of Contested Equality

The examination of Japan's racial equality proposal at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and its intricate aftermath in Brazil offers a compelling testament to the deeply interconnected nature of global history and the enduring fluidity of racial constructs. What began as a diplomatic maneuver by a rising Asian power to assert its place on the international stage transcended the confines of the Quai d'Orsay, igniting a profound, albeit often contradictory, dialogue about race, national identity, and international justice across the Atlantic and Pacific. The "Pacific Route" is not merely a geographical descriptor but a conceptual framework that underscores how seemingly disparate national trajectories became intertwined through shared questions of human dignity and belonging.

Japan's persistent advocacy for racial non-discrimination, though ultimately thwarted by the racial anxieties and political machinations of the dominant Western powers, was a pivotal moment. It exposed the stark limitations of the post-World War I liberal international order, revealing that universal principles like self-determination and equality were often selectively applied, reinforcing rather than dismantling existing racial hierarchies. The defeat of the proposal instilled a deep sense of resentment in Japan, contributing to a growing nationalist and militarist sentiment that would profoundly shape its future foreign policy. However, its echo resonated globally, providing a crucial point of reference for anti-colonial and anti-racist movements in the decades to come.

For Brazil, the episode was a profound moment of self-reflection, albeit one fraught with paradox. The confusion and political manipulation surrounding Epitácio Pessoa's vote in Paris laid bare the inherent fragility of the "racial democracy" myth. While Brazil outwardly projected an image of harmonious miscegenation, the intense public debates, particularly in the press, revealed a deep-seated fear of racial "contamination" by "unassimilable" Japanese immigrants. The nation's diplomatic choice to abstain, justified by the principle of national sovereignty over immigration, implicitly aligned Brazil with the very racialized exclusion it claimed to transcend internally. This disjuncture between declared ideals and practical policies highlighted the ongoing struggle within Brazil to reconcile its complex racial history with its aspirations for modernity and international standing.

Crucially, the controversy provided an unexpected opening for Afro-Brazilian intellectuals to challenge the official narrative of racial harmony. By seizing upon the language of "fraternity" and "equality" – the very terms invoked by both the Japanese proposal and Brazil's own constitution – figures like Hemetério José dos Santos, Theodoro Sampaio, and João do Rio articulated powerful critiques of the racial prejudice that persisted despite claims of "racelessness." Their interventions, whether by exposing hypocrisy, advocating for constitutional rights, or subtly reinterpreting racial mixture, demonstrated a nascent Black internationalism, connecting their local struggles to broader global movements against racial oppression. These voices, often amplified through the vibrant Afro-Brazilian press, not only questioned the sincerity of Brazil's racial democracy but also laid important groundwork for future anti-racist activism, shaping the very language and strategies of subsequent social movements.

The legacy of this intercontinental encounter persists. The debate inadvertently contributed to the racial categorization of Brazilians of Asian descent, a classification that continues to be part of the official census. More broadly, it offers a powerful historical lesson on the adaptive nature of racist ideologies, which can seamlessly shift from overt prejudice to ostensibly neutral arguments about "economic order" or "national sovereignty" to justify exclusion. Yet, it also underscores the enduring power of ideas, demonstrating how a seemingly defeated proposal could nevertheless spark critical conversations, empower marginalized voices, and contribute to the long, arduous struggle for genuine racial equality across diverse national contexts. The "Pacific Route" thus serves as a compelling reminder that the pursuit of equality is a continuous, globally entangled process, shaped by diplomatic endeavors, domestic politics, and the unyielding efforts of those who dare to challenge the status quo.

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39. Ibid., 9.

40. Lesser, Immigration, 95–96.

41. Lesser, Negotiating, 92.

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43. Skidmore, Black into White, 134.

44. Streeter, Epitácio Pessoa, 78–79.

45. I found coverage of the proposal in more than twenty-five newspapers across Brazil, about two-thirds of which I cite here. Those papers that I did not cite ran coverage that either reproduced points made elsewhere or was tangential. Additional archival work may yield further insights, but it is clear that while politicians debated the Japanese proposal in public, they paid little attention to it on the floor of the Câmara dos Deputados (Chamber of Deputies), an indication that they viewed it as fodder for attacking opponents but had less interest in engaging it as a serious matter of policy. When the deputies discussed the Peace Conference, they addressed other issues discussed in Paris, such as the Monroe Doctrine and workers' rights. For example, see Annaes da Camara dos Deputados, Sessões de 28 de abril a 4 de junho de 1919. Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1920, 283–84, 363–79.

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47. "A Emenda…," O Paiz (Rio de Janeiro), 25 Mar. 1919: 1.

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49. "A Questão das Raças…," A Republica, 2 Apr. 1919: 2.

50. "A Conferencia da Paz." A Razão (Rio de Janeiro), 15 Apr. 1919: 5.

51. "O Brasil […]." O Imparcial (Rio de Janeiro), 20 Apr. 1919: 2.

52. "Raças e cores." O Paiz, 21 Apr. 1919: 3.

53. "A repercussão…," O Imparcial, 22 Apr. 1919: 5.

54. "O voto…," O Imparcial, 22 Apr. 1919: 5.

55. "A conferencia…," A Hora (Salvador), 23 Apr. 1919: 1.

56. Quote in "A conferencia …," A Hora (Salvador), 23 Apr. 1919: 1. The Japan Times piece appears in "A desegualdade…," A Hora (Salvador), 23 Apr. 1919: 1.

57. M. Benicio, "Os Japonezes," O Fluminense (Niterói), 24 Apr. 1919: 1.

58. Ibid.," 1. Also see, "As extravagancias…," Diario de Santos (Santos), 24 Apr. 1919: 1.

59. "Comité Nacional Ruy Barbosa," O Imparcial, 24 Apr. 1919: 5.

60. "Negros e mulatos," A Razão, 24 Apr. 1919: 1.

61. It is also difficult not to hear these words echo in contemporary rhetoric about migrants stealing "Black jobs" in the United States.

62. "O Momento Politico," O Imparcial, 25 Apr. 1919: 3.

63. While racial lynching is often cited as an example of the difference between Brazil and the United States, there is evidence that such violence did, in fact, also occur in Brazil, though on a much smaller scale than in the United States. Monsma, Karl. "Linchamentos raciais no pós-abolição: Alguns casos excepcionais do oeste paulista." In Flávio, Gomes and Petrônio, Domingues, eds., Políticas da raça: Experiências e legados da abolição e da pós-emancipação no Brasil. São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2014, 195–210.

64. Fred S. Fergusson, "Communicado Telegraphico…," O Paiz, 23 Feb. 1919: 2.

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66. For example, "Odio de raças…," O Paiz, 23 July 1919: 2; "Odio de raças." O Paiz, 30 July 1919: 2.

67. According to Shimazu, Romania and Czechoslovakia also supported the measure when it was first introduced; Japan, 21.

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82. For example, Celso Vieira, "Egualdade das raças." O Pharol (Juiz de Fora), 27 Apr. 1919: 1; "Telegramas." Pacotilha (São Luís), 25 Apr. 1919: 1; "Telegrammas." A Provincia (Recife), 3 May 1919: 1.

83. "A desigualdade…," Jornal do Recife (Recife), 28 Apr. 1919: 1.

84. "O conflicto…," Jornal do Recife, 28 Apr. 1919: 1.

85. "A questão de raças…," O Exemplo, 4 May 1919: 1.

86. Alberto, Terms of Inclusion, 69–109; Seigel, Uneven Encounters, 217–21.

87. Alberto, Terms of Inclusion, 69.

88. M. F., "13 de Maio." O Exemplo, 11 May 1919: 1.

89. X. X., "A egualdade…," O Exemplo, 11 May 1919: 2.

90. "Contrastes notaveis." O Exemplo, 11 May 1919: 1.

91. This idea also lined up squarely with those of the Nationalist League mentioned above.

92. "A questão…," O Exemplo, 4 May 1919: 1.

93. "As festas…," O Exemplo, 6 July 1919: 1.

94. Original emphasis. D. Felippe Senillosa, "Evolução." O Exemplo, 20 July 1919: 1. Also see D. Fellipe Senillos [sic], "Evolução." O Exemplo, 27 July 1919: 1.

95. João do Rio, "O voto…," O Exemplo, 7 Dec. 1919: 1.

96. Rio, João. Na Conferencia da Paz, vol. 1. Rio de Janeiro: Villas-Boas & Co., 1919, 103.

97. This and the remaining quotations in this paragraph and the next are from: João do Rio, "O voto."

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